ZoneModa Journal. Vol.10 n.1S (2020)
Essays
S.I. Be Cool! Aesthetic Imperatives and Social Practices
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/10564
ISSN 2611-0563

Knitting, Weaving, Embroidery, and Quilting as Subversive Aesthetic Strategies: On Feminist Interventions in Art, Fashion, and Philosophy

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Published: May 2●, 2●2●

Abstract

In the paper I pose the question of how, on artistic, aesthetic, and philosophical levels, decoration and domestic handicrafts as subversive strategies enable the undermining and breakdown of class-based and patriarchal divisions into high and low, objective and subjective, public and private, masculine and feminine. I explore whether handicrafts, in accordance with feminist postulates, are transgressive, transformative, and inclusive. I link handicrafts with the feminist perspective, since, in the second half of the twentieth century, it was precisely the feminist movement that initiated significant changes in the social and cultural perception of women, femininity, and gender relations. Thus I apply this perspective in the first place to the analysis of selected works of contemporary art in which handicrafts is used not only as a means of artistic expression, but also as a subversive aesthetic strategy. I also demonstrate how the world of fashion transforms and aesthetizes handicrafts, whose presence in fashion makes it an area in which, in addition to imperatives and aesthetic values, social attitudes, ethical values, and world views are shaped. Finally, referring to the works of selected feminist authors (Mary Field Belenky, Mary Daly, Evelyn Fox-Keller, Donna Haraway), I show how these researchers have metaphorically interpreted handicrafts as specifically feminine ways of creating and developing knowledge.

Keywords: Handicrafts; Subversive Strategies; Contemporary Art; Fashion; Feminist Philosophy.

Acknowledgements

The paper was supported by National Science Centre (Poland), grant number 2016/21/N/HS1/03516.

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Introduction

In a 1971 essay, Linda Nochlin posed the question "Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists?"[1] The researcher thus drew attention to the absence through the centuries of women's creativity from the art world. In analyzing the complex causes of this phenomenon, Nochlin observed that the tradition of Western European art was dominated by the myth of the Great Artist, who "is conceived of as one who has 'Genius'; Genius, in turn, is thought of as an atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person of the Great Artist."[2] Within the framework of this myth, the concept of genius has been associated with creativity, independent thinking, and the ability to transcend the material, physical, and sensual — and, ultimately, has been identified exclusively with masculinity. The artist-genius was elevated nearly to the rank of a "divine creator,"[3] with the power to create from nothing and to give shape to chaotic matter. The artist-genius thus became the only authorized creator of the "genuine" art exhibited in public space and universally admired.

Decorative art was at the same time regarded as a practical activity, of a utilitarian character, and denied the status of art. In the patriarchal and androcentric world, this vast field of human activity included all the works of women, which were physically and metaphorically assigned to the private sphere.[4] Nochlin observed that the practical dimension of this work was often combined with aesthetic functions: women decorated with or created functional objects of everyday use that possessed aesthetic qualities. However, their aesthetic values did not equal those of male canonical art, which was created for pure aesthetic pleasure and required the assumption of the appropriate creative attitude. Carolyn Korsmeyer has noted in this context that in androcentric Western culture

> a craft product, which may be very beautiful and made with great care, is not a proper work of art because it is supposed to fulfill a certain function, which limits the freedom of expression of its creator.[5]

The expression of women's experiences was therefore limited to practical forms, i.e., handicrafts or needlework, and thus women's creativity was shaped in a specific manner. Therefore, Rozsika Parker, a researcher of women's handicraft art, wrote that "[t]o know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women."[6]

This state of affairs changed only during the transition from the 1960s to the 70s, along with the emergence of the work of female artists involved in the feminist struggle for women's rights. This work was of a political character, because its purpose was to change existing artistic practices which excluded women and to call attention to issues related to women's experiences. In this context, the philosopher Hilde Hein wrote:

> Feminist artists face the challenge of recasting these same experiences as they are undergone by women, so as to reveal an aspect of them that has been ignored. In doing so, they expose both the politics and the gender bias of traditional art and risk rejection of their own work on the ground that it is not art within that traditional definition. What is distinctive to feminist art, then, is not that it is "about" women, but that it is so in a way that is new, albeit using the same instruments as before.[7]

1. Linda Nochlin, "Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists?," in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), 145–78.
2. Nochlin, 153.
3. Nochlin, 158.
4. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, "Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts," in *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, ed. C. Korsmeyer (Malden-Oxford-Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 44–55.
5. Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 33.
6. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London-New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010), ix.
7. Hilde Hein, "The Role of Feminist Aesthetics in Feminist Theory," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 48, n. 4 (1990): 284.

Hein was one of the first feminist researchers to observe that women's experiences could be displayed in art using traditional means and forms of expression that women had been using for centuries. Thus, it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that art became a space in which women could express their own life experiences using means of expression with which they were already familiar.[8]

In the second half of the twentieth century, however, feminist interventions — critical and subversive — were not limited to the field of art. The feminist perspective gradually began to be applied to selected humanities and social sciences. Academic research, undertaken beginning in the 1970s by feminist researchers, was initially characterized by a critical approach to traditional concepts and theories. Thus, in the first phase, academic feminism subjected historical phenomena to reflection, tracing the symptoms of discrimination against women and the domination of androcentric constructs of thought and language. The main goal of these researchers was criticism of traditional academic disciplines from a feminist perspective, thereby including a departure in the direction of new, feminine theories.

Within the framework of particular fields of the social sciences and humanities, constructive theories of a positive nature, exposing and validating gender issues, began to emerge over time. Among the subjects on which feminist researchers reflected, the field of interest to me in the present article is philosophy, particularly epistemology. At present, feminist interventions in the field of epistemology are already part of a well-established history dating back over fifty years. Within the framework of feminist epistemology, many concepts essential to contemporary research on the issues of knowledge and cognition have emerged. Interestingly, many of these concepts are related, directly or indirectly, to women's methods of creating domestic and decorative art, to handicrafts and needlework.

My aim is to demonstrate the subversive potential — undermining and changing norms and establishing new meanings and functions — of handicrafts in art created by women, in feminist philosophy, and in modern fashion. I believe that the world of fashion is now an important element of the world of art, since it is often the world's leading designers who actually create "works of art" and determine current artistic and aesthetic trends. In the fashion world, it was only relatively recently that elements of handicrafts — embroidery, quilts, appliqués, etc. — emerged and were given prominence. Only in recent years has fashion definitely opened up to forms and textures traditionally regarded as outdated, old-fashioned, and anachronistic, thus seemingly changing their sociocultural status.

In the present article I pose the question of how, on artistic, aesthetic, and philosophical levels, decoration and domestic handicrafts as subversive strategies enable the undermining and breakdown of class-based and patriarchal divisions into "mind-body; universal-particular; reason-emotion, sense, and appetite; and so forth — including male-female."[9] In other words, the question is whether, in accordance with feminist postulates, handicrafts are transgressive (do they enable the blurring of existing binary divisions and borders?), transformative (do they enable the transformation of artistic, aesthetic, and philosophical language?), and inclusive (are art, fashion, and philosophy becoming more egalitarian and sensitive to otherness, difference, diversity?). I present decoration and domestic handicrafts as an example of subversive practices in the fields of art, fashion, and philosophy. I link these practices with the feminist perspective, since, in the second half of the twentieth century, it was precisely the feminist movement that initiated significant changes in the social and cultural perception of women, femininity, and gender relations.

8. Renate Möhrmann. "Occupation: Woman Artist. On the Changing Relations Between Being a Woman and Artistic Production," in *Feminist Aesthetics*, ed. Gisela Ecker, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 150–61.

9. Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 92.

Sewing Women's History: Handicrafts as Subversive Strategies in Feminist Art

Throughout the history of art, decoration and domestic handicrafts have been regarded as women's work and, as such, not considered "high" or fine art.[10] Simultaneously, women were barred from the competitive and conceptual world of fine art, along with their art, because the work they created was marginalized and devalued by the male-dominated art world:

> It is precisely the specific history of women and their artwork that is effaced when art historical discourse categorizes this kind of art practice as decorative, dexterous, industrious, and geometric and as the expression of the feminine spirit in art. However, the use of these terms which maintain the hierarchy and establish distinctions between art and craft represents an underlying value system.[11]

Knitting, weaving, embroidery, and quilting: none of these has been deemed worthy artistic equivalents of the grand mediums of painting or sculpture. The traditional androcentric aesthetic hierarchy that privileges certain forms of art over others based on gender associations has historically devalued "women's work" specifically because it was associated with the domestic and private spheres.[12] For the distinction between art and craft is defined not only by the materials being used but by the intentions behind the work, namely, where it is created, who it is for, and what purpose it is intended to serve. While fine arts are a public, professional activity, craft is traditionally practiced in the home and can be defined as "domestic art."[13] As Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock note:

> [T]he conditions for production and audience for this kind of art are different from those of the art made in a studio and art school, for the market and gallery. It is from these different conditions that the hierarchal division between art and craft has been constructed; it has nothing to do with the inherent qualities of the object nor the gender of the maker.[14]

This social construction rendered it nearly impossible for women's craft to present itself to any kind of public spectator.

The hierarchy of art with all its consequences was radically challenged in the 1960s, especially by feminist artists, who sought to resurrect women's crafts and decorative art as a viable artistic means for the expression of female experience, thereby indicating their political and subversive potential. Already Kate Walker, as one of the first American artists to use handicrafts and needlework in her work, had declared that "[e]mbroidery was one technique among many which could be combined in new ways to create forms of art truer to our skills and experience."[15] For the purposes of this article I have selected several works of contemporary art in which needlework is used not only as a means of artistic expression, but also as a subversive strategy for changing the perception and functioning of women and gender relations in contemporary societies.

Art critic Lucy R. Lippard explained in her 1973 essay, "Household Images in Art," that previously women artists had avoided "*female techniques* like sewing, weaving, knitting, ceramics, even the use of pastel colors (pink!) and delicate lines — all natural elements of artmaking [because] they could not afford to be called *feminine artists*."[16] The Women's Movement changed that, she argued, and gave

10. Cf. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 1–16.

11. Cf. Parker and Pollock, *Crafty Women*, 44.

12. Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Feminist Aesthetics," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-aesthetics/ (accessed: September 11, 2019).

13. Cf. Parker and Pollock, *Crafty Women*, 44.

14. Parker and Pollock, 51.

15. Kate Walker, as cited in Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xiv.

16. Lucy R. Lippard, "Household Images in Art," in *From the Center: Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), 57.

women the confidence to begin "shedding their shackles, proudly untying the apron strings — and, in some cases, keeping the apron on, flaunting it, turning it into art."[17] This kind of subversive artistic action can be attributed to Faith Ringgold, an American painter, writer, mixed-media sculptor, and performance artist, who is, however, best known for her narrative quilts. In her handmade quilts, Ringgold celebrates undervalued female creative production, just as her *Family of Woman* (Fig. 1), a 1970 collection of masks and figurines — portraits from her childhood of Mama Jones, Andrew, Barbara, and Faith herself — included costumes sewn by the artist's mother, a professional seamstress. Ringgold's narrative quilts opened the path for the re-evaluation of anonymous art done by women. The artist quilted the stories of average (and also black, like herself) women in order to be widely heard and acknowledged.

Figure 1: Faith Ringgold, *Mrs. Jones and Family*, 1973. From Family of Woman Mask Series. Sewn fabric and embroidery. Collection of the artist. © Faith Ringgold. Brooklyn Museum, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/womens_work, [accessed: July 24, 2019]

By incorporating everyday activities in her projects, Julita Wójcik, a contemporary Polish artist, performer, and creator of artistic campaigns in many Polish and European cities, questions the boundaries between the spheres of life and art.[18] In her works, Wójcik for the most part makes use of simple, everyday home activities, usually attributed to women, and transforms them into artistic activities. On one hand, she underlines their unquestionable charm; on the other, one can find in the artist's works a critical approach to the stereotypes connected with so-called female roles. For instance, Wójcik has created several crocheted sculptures and wall pieces depicting communist-era prefab buildings. Her piece titled *Falowiec* (The Waver) (Fig. 2) is the most frequently loaned piece in the collection of the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw. Inspiration, however, does not mean affirmation, and Wójcik often engages in criticism of the everyday environment by introducing an element of irony, playing with scale, introducing surprising material illusions, or reworking a concrete legacy into a knitted form, as if commenting ironically, as in this case, on the monumentality of architecture.

The artist Billie Zangewa, born in 1973 in Malawi, graduated with a fine arts degree from Rhodes University, South Africa. Her mother had worked in the textile industry, sewing and embroidering. Zangewa's earliest pieces were mostly embroideries depicting botanical scenes and animals from Botswana. She first attracted notice, however, with a series of one-off handbags decorated with silk off-cuts, the sheen of which reminded Zangewa of the shimmering tower blocks she saw on her daily commute in Johannesburg. These were initially layered to form abstract patterns; however, as her skill in composition and stitching grew, she worked on figurative scenes using silk. Frustrated by the effort required to produce a single bag, the artist began to make the luminescent and irregularly shaped silk collages for which she

17. Lippard, 58.

18. Culture.pl, "Julita Wójcik," https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/julita-wojcik (accessed: July 24, 2019).

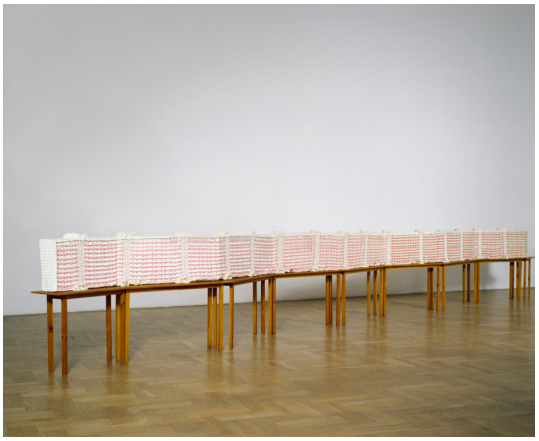

Figure 2: Julita Wójcik, *Falowiec* (The Waver), 2005-2006, https://zacheta.art.pl/pl/kolekcja/katalog/wojcik-julita-falowiec-wavy-block-2/galeria, [accessed: July 24, 2019]

is now best known. In other words, in her artistic training, she tested several modes of expression, but finally became passionate about the use of silk, due to both her interest in the fabrics and their luminosity and the effects of reflection it enabled, indicating that "silk has a fabulous quality of reflection but at the same time, I think it is very modern and at the forefront of fashion."[19]

In her works (Fig. 3), Zangewa seeks to express a feminine perspective on her urban environment. Her work has resulted in the production of handbags, using scenes taken from the city of Johannesburg. As well, she has produced collages, using text, images with a pop art influence, and, sometimes, effects including embroidery, beads, and mats on the surface of the fabric. She claims that "sewing is traditionally a female pastime, so it is about identity for me. I'm expressing myself and embracing my femininity through my choice of material. Sewing is also very therapeutic and, as a person who internalizes things, I find relief in it."[20]

Another work comes from Sarah Naqvi, a 20-year-old Indian artist, currently in her third year at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. She creates insightful, provocative, and creative works of art using various media that exhibit the female form in all its glorious reality and mundanity. Naqvi uses mediums such as embroidery and cloth sculptures to celebrate body positivity. Her earliest memory of art was watching her grandmother and mother embroidering when she was seven. Her family has always practiced embroidery, giving the artist a personal connection to the form; however, her narrative is completely different. Whereas her grandmother and mother practiced embroidery during the wedding season, Naqvi uses the form to convey the idea, rather than the aesthetics, behind her art. The artist claims:

> I'm just trying to bring substance to art and not just beauty. The themes I work on are heavily inclined towards women empowerment, sexuality, and most importantly understanding the future that is at stake in trivializing these matters. I've been taught ever since I was a child to fight for what is right and speak up for anyone who has been kept quiet for too long and for me that is what feminism really is. It's standing up for one another, because if a girl or guy in some part of the world is denied basic rights, it's not just their battle, it's ours.[21]

19. Awut Atak, "Billie Zangewa on expressing her black femininity and being a mother and artist," *True Africa* (November 19, 2015), (https://trueafrica.co/article/artist-billie-zangewa-on-feminity-expressing-her-black-female-identity-and-being-a-mother-and-artist/ (accessed: July 24, 2019).

20. Atak, https://trueafrica.co/article/artist-billie-zangewa-on-feminity-expressing-her-black-female-identity-and-being-a-mother-and-artist/, (accessed: July 24, 2019).

21. Asmita Ghosh, "Meet Sarah Naqvi: The Textile Artist Who Sews Feminist Embroidery," *Feminism in India* (July 5, 2017),https://feminisminindia.com/2017/07/05/sarah-naqvi-feminist-embroidery/ (accessed: July 24, 2019).

Figure 3: Billy Zangewa, *Exquisite fantasy*, 2014. Silk tapestry. AwutAtak, "Billie Zangewa on expressing her black femininity and being a mother and artist," *True Africa*, (November 19, 2015), https://trueafrica.co/article/artist-billie-zangewa-on-feminity-expressing-her-black-female-identity-and-being-a-mother-and-artist/, [accessed: July 24, 2019]

Naqvi does not hide the fact that her art has a strong subversive message and feminist content. She admits that only this kind of creativity serves her as a source of self-confidence and emancipation, transcending boundaries and breaking barriers:

> Embroidery is certainly one of my biggest strengths, especially with the issues I tend to work on. The fact that it has been tagged as "women's work" and that "it's too girly a task" — with every stitch I make I hope that it challenges these common apperceptions and shows how much strength and voice every piece can carry.[22]

Undoubtedly, her art highlights taboo topics in her country, such as menstruation and unrealistic body ideals, taking a bold stance against orthodox conversation and braving outraged responses (Fig. 4).

Reinventing "Grandma Moses Embroidery"[23]: Handicrafts as Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Fashion

Subversive feminist activities related to decoration and domestic handicrafts have begun to penetrate other areas of culture. In the 1980s, examples of needlework appeared in the collections of the most important fashion designers. Today the world of fashion, which is essentially linked to the world of art and artistic creativity, uses, transforms, and aesthetizes handicrafts and needlework. Their presence in fashion makes it an area in which, in addition to imperatives and aesthetic values, social attitudes, ethical values, and world views are shaped. Therefore I claim that, in the fashion world, creations based on

22. Ghosh, https://feminisminindia.com/2017/07/05/sarah-naqvi-feminist-embroidery/ (accessed: July 24, 2019).

23. Known by her nickname 'Grandma Moses', Anna Mary Robertson Moses was an American folk artist (1860-1961). Beginning in 1932, she made embroidered pictures in yarn for her friends and family. She also created beautiful quilted objects, defined by Lucy R. Lippard as a form of "hobby art." See: Judith Stein, *The White-Haired Girl: A Feminist Reading: Grandma Moses in the 21st Century* (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2001), 48–63.

Figure 4: Sarah Naqvi, *Menstruation is normal. Period*, 2016. Asmita Ghosh, "Meet Sarah Naqvi: The Textile Artist Who Sews Feminist Embroidery," *Feminism in India*, (July 5, 2017), https://feminisminindia.com/2017/07/05/sarah-naqvi-feminist-embroidery/, [accessed: July 24, 2019].

craft and decoration and considered "feminine" have taken on a new, revolutionary dimension. What had been hidden, obscured, silenced, devalued, and kept private for centuries has been raised to the status of a fashion trend, appearing first in the glare of the runway lights, then on the covers of the most important fashion magazines. In other words, these creations have been included in the fashion (male) mainstream, creating a new, "herstorical" narrative.

A Gucci designer, Alessandro Michele, has pointed out this creative and subversive potential of needlework in fashion, saying that he loves taking prints, embroidery, appliqués — precious things that seem to be from another time — and using them to create a new contemporary story.[24] Michele, inspired by the history of handicrafts practiced by women at home, decided to tell this story in front of the wide audience of fashion catwalks. The story encompasses inspirations from different periods and cultures; hence, appearing in this particular Gucci collection were, *inter alia*, patterns from folk needlepoint from nineteenth-century America, imperial China, and the *ancien régime* of France. In this paper I present only two examples of high-fashion collections created by leading global designers in recent years in which decorative handicrafts were used: Gucci Spring 2016 (Fig. 5) and Dior Fall 2018 (Fig. 6). However, in recent years, there have been many more such projects and collections (e.g. Chanel Spring-Summer 2016, Dior Fall 2011, Oscar de la Renta Spring-Summer 2014), and their wealth and diversity lead us to believe that the subversive revolution in fashion has only just begun.

Interestingly, young upstart designers are also reinventing what we traditionally expect from embroidered fabric and giving it a decidedly modern twist. Started by stylist Lauren Grant, the label S.a.r.k uses simple, traditional forms such as white shirts, adding, however, a trendy, youthful twist. The designer explains that, for her, simple fabrics are like a canvas on which she creates a work of art: "The formality, the heritage, and the way the white shirt works as a blank canvas somehow encapsulates fine tailoring and effortlessness at the same time."[25] Grant's inspiration derives from childhood and high school days. Hence, appearing in her designs are embroidered Bic lighters, Prozac pills and Bakewell tarts (Fig. 7). On the designer's official website, we read that "In S.a.r.k, the perfection of the shirting is subverted by the irreverent detailing. This detailing is inspired by a collage of Lauren's own teen memories. Of bad habits, YBAs, Guy Bourdain glamour and suburban Boots stores."[26]

24. Steff Yotka, "Alessandro Michele Reveals His Inspirations on Gucci's New Site," *Vogue* (October 19, 2015), https://www.vogue.com/article/gucci-website-alessandro-michele-inspiration (accessed: July 24, 2019).

25. Roisin Lanigan, "5 young designers making embroidery cool again," *i-D* (August 2, 2018), https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/mb49d4/5-young-designers-making-embroidery-cool-again, (accessed: July 24, 2019).

26. S.a.r.k homepage, https://www.sarklondon.com/about-us, (accessed: July 24, 2019).

Figure 5: Gucci Spring 2016, (Photo by Getty Images), Steff Yotka, "Alessandro Michele Reveals His Inspirations on Gucci's New Site," *Vouge*, (October 19, 2015), https://www.vogue.com/article/gucci-website-alessandro-michele-inspiration, [accessed: July 24, 2019]

Figure 6: Dior Fall 2018, (Photo by Corey Tenold), Janelle Okwodu, "Dior's New Girl Is a Cell Biologist Turned Model," *Vouge*, (February 28, 2018), https://www.vogue.com/article/ninouk-akkermann-dior-model-cell-biologist, [accessed: July 24, 2019]

Figure 7: Lauren Grant, S.a.r.k, Le Smoking Shirt, https://www.sarklondon.com/shop/le-smoking-shirt, [accessed: July 24, 2019]

In her projects, Grant relies on simplicity and a strong message, using needlework to express her own experience, memories, or emotions related to past events. The use of handicrafts in Grant's projects is thus not only subversive — the elegance of the white shirt is undermined by the triviality of the tablet box — but also therapeutic. Indeed, the designer describes her works as a biography of what she's doing with embroidery as therapy.

Another young designer, James Merry, a self-taught embroiderer and collaborator with the famous artist Björk, splits his time between New York and Iceland (where he lives in a cabin cocooned by lavender lupines). In the world of design and fashion, Merry became known first as the creator of Björk's unusual stage outfits. The designer emphasizes that the artist and her specific taste are an important inspiration for him in creative work:

> Björk had a really specific set of references and shared images with me, including some of really gorgeous moths. I loved their pronged fern-like white antennae most, so began embroidering those, and it slowly turned into some sort of techno-Victorian-moth mask.[27] (Fig. 8)

Collaboration with Björk led the young designer to create clothing designs of his own of an everyday character, in which he uses needlework, indicating — like the previously mentioned artists and the designer Grant — their therapeutic dimension:

> I love the pace and focus and control of hand embroidery. It slows you down. It zooms you into a really precise point of focus, which can be very therapeutic if you have an otherwise quite large and busy life. And the portability of it — I can fit everything I need in my backpack and work on stuff while I'm on flights or watching TV. And then I love the wearability of the end product — they're not stuck in a picture frame on a wall, you can wear them and bend them and put them in the washing machine when they get dirty. I love that aspect of it.[28]

27. Zio Baritaux, "Björk collaborator James Merry's incredible embroidery creations," *i-D* (July 2, 2015), https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/9kyzn7/bjork-collaborator-james-merrys-incredible-embroidery-creations, (accessed: July 24, 2019).

28. Baritaux, https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/9kyzn7/bjork-collaborator-james-merrys-incredible-embroidery-creations, (accessed: July 24, 2019).

Figure 8: Björk'smask by James Merry (Photo by Santiago Filipe)
https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/9kyzn7/bjork-collaborator-james-merrys-incredible-embroidery-creations,
[accessed: July 24, 2019]

Merry's works are full of references to the nature so close to his heart, be it wildlife or animal anatomy. His best-known designs are dandelions, ferns, mushrooms, and hummingbirds, embroidered onto vintage sportswear (Figs. 9, 10). It seems that by associating images of nature with major clothing brands with the help of embroidery, Merry makes a subversive aesthetic change in the perception of these brands, inclining one to reflect critically on the consumerism of contemporary culture. Thus, his designs, in addition to their aesthetic or artistic impact, also shape social attitudes and ethical values, influencing contemporary consumers' awareness of the fashion world.

Figure 9: James Merry, Adidas / Honeysuckle (Great quality Adidas sweater embellished with custom embroidered honeysuckle. Made in Iceland), https://www.jtmerry.com/product-page/adidas-honeysuckle,
[accessed: July 24, 2019]

Figure 10: James Merry, Nike / Baby Owl & Magic Mushroom (Vintage black Nike sweater with hand embroidered baby owl, magic mushrooms and moss. Hand Embroidered in Iceland), https://www.jtmerry.com/product-page/nike-baby-owl-magic-mushroom, [accessed: July 24, 2019]

Spinning the Web of Knowledge: Handicrafts as Subversive Strategies in Feminist Philosophy

Knowledge, in the most general sense, constitutes organization of the results of human cognition of the world. The term *knowledge* refers to the so-called individual, personal knowledge of a particular human being, as well as to scientific knowledge, which belongs to the realm of intersubjective social consciousness. Within the framework of the Western European tradition alone, many theories of knowledge have arisen; their common determinant may be the classification of objectivity, signifying the postulates of the generality, universality, credibility, and reliability of knowledge.[29] Objectivity, as traditionally understood, also means that knowledge is intersubjectively communicable, that is, understood by all participants via the process of communication through language, and also that, being empirically verifiable, it crosses the boundaries of practice, functioning as a theoretical result of the research process. Objective knowledge also presents a universally human point of view regarding the nature of things and applies to all cases concerning which specific assertions are expressed in a reliable manner. The ideal of objectivity also implies the fixation of knowledge within the rules of reason and its purification from any subjective elements, such as the emotions, individual experiences, or corporeality of the subject.

In the light of feminist criticism, the objectivity of knowledge is considered an idealistic thought construct created by men for the use of the traditional model of practicing science and philosophy. Sally Haslanger describes this construct as *assumed objectivity*, understanding it as the ideal of an absolute, perspective-free view of reality.[30] The result of this view is knowledge defined as general and universal, derived from empirical research, but in fact detached from the reality from which it emerged. This knowledge is the result of research in which the inalienable subjective features of the researcher are omitted, along with the links of the studied object with history, culture, and society. Within the framework of feminist criticism, such knowledge is defined not only as non-objective, but also as devoid of epistemic value.[31] From a feminist perspective, then, only those activities and theories whose direct impact on sociopolitical and cultural reality is not only possible but necessary and effective are considered cognitively valuable.

In order for knowledge to be effective, inclusive, and egalitarian, and therefore useful for entire societies, the methods of its creation and development must differ from those practiced within the traditional

29. Matthias Steup, "Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/epistemology/, (accessed July 24, 2019).

30. Sally Haslanger, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified," in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, eds. L. M. Antony, C. Witt (Boulder-San Francisco-Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), 107–11.

31. Elizabeth Potter, "Gender and Epistemic Negotiation," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. L. Alcoff, E. Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 161–86.

academic paradigm. In response to this need, alternatives to the androcentric concepts of cognition have appeared in feminist research in the field of epistemology, with the aim of establishing the conditions governing the knowledge thus characterized. With this goal, feminist researchers have arrived, directly or indirectly, at the idea of decoration and domestic handicrafts. In this way, I believe that the subversive potential of the latter has been used to deconstruct and transform traditional philosophy.

For instance, Evelyn Fox-Keller proposed a definition of knowledge based on a positive approach to the valuation of what is subjective and what is objective in the process of gaining knowledge. Simultaneously, this philosopher offered an expanded understanding of objectivity, which she called *dynamic objectivity* and described as

> ... a pursuit of knowledge that makes use of subjective experience ... in the interests of a more effective objectivity. Premised on continuity, it recognizes difference between self and other as an opportunity for a deeper and more articulated kinship.[32]

A researcher referring to the ideal of dynamic objectivity should demonstrate special and continuous mindfulness towards the world that surrounds him or her. The concentration and mindfulness are characteristic features of the handicrafts practiced by women for centuries, which thus, in this case, can constitute a model for the proposed changes in the prevailing approach to the processes of creating and developing knowledge. Moreover, Fox-Keller is convinced that a proper research attitude is free from the desire to control the subject and refers to a holistic view of reality, in which all elements constitute a connected, embroidered whole. According to Fox-Keller, cognition of parts of this whole should lead "only" to a better understanding of the subject's situation, not to control of the object of study.

Another philosopher, Mary Field Belenky, has presented the development of knowledge as a five-stage process of collecting and sewing up facts, culminating in *constructed knowledge*. Belenky's proposal represents a feminist search for knowledge which takes the feminist perspective into account, that is, knowledge which is inclusive, sensitive to context, and which transgresses traditional boundaries, but which at the same time does not completely reject standards of objectivity as traditionally understood. The first stage of the development of knowledge is *silence*, which means, above all, reliance on the acknowledged authorities which determine the scope of what is acknowledged as certain and reliable knowledge. The second stage is, according to Belenky, uncritical acceptance and reproduction of existing truths, or *received knowledge*, and thus thinking within the existing canons of objective and rational knowledge. In the next stage we have *subjective knowledge*, within the framework of which the rationalistic, androcentric rules of the creation of knowledge are still in force; however, at the same time, subjective elements, that is, reflections on the subjective character of knowledge resulting from individual experiences, come to the fore. *Procedural knowledge* is the stage in which emphasis is placed on the processual nature of knowledge, which is in a constant state of development and tension between what is objective and what is subjective. The point of arrival of the development of "feminine methods of cognition," as Belenky defines it, is *constructed knowledge*, which is contextual and which integrates subjective evaluation and objectivization strategies.[33] According to Belenky, this knowledge is the result of the liberation of women from androcentric ideals of knowledge and of a crisis of trust in institutional requirements for cognitive processes, through simultaneous acknowledgement of the experiences of the individual as an equally reliable source of truths about reality.[34]

Androcentrically understood objectivity of knowledge is rejected, however, by Mary Daly, who metaphorically describes the process of gaining knowledge by women as *spinning*.[35] According to Daly, the knowledge that women gain has a destructive-constructive character. This means that spinning is characterized by two stages: first, a critical grasp of the existing androcentric truths and their disassembly, second, construction of new theories based on gynocentric concepts. In this way,

32. Evelyn Fox-Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 117.

33. Mary Field Belenky *et al.*, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 23–152.

34. Belenky, 58.

35. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 245–46.

the knowledge that is "spun" is not a hermetic set of permanent and objective truths, but is in constant motion, intertwining itself with threads of reality which, in the context of logocentric male studies, have never coexisted. It is worth noting that it is not only Daly who resorts to a metaphorical approach to women's methods of producing knowledge, using terms such as *spinning*, *weaving*, or *knitting*. These metaphors, initially developed by feminist researchers in the field of literary theory, are also applied in philosophical reflections, including those based on feminist epistemology and theories of knowledge.[36]

In addressing the issue of feminist subversive approaches to knowledge and the conditions of its objectivity, Donna Haraway's *situated knowledge* ought not to be omitted. The thesis of situated knowledge boils down to the assertion that knowledge is achieved by a research community including members of marginalized social groups, because only they, on account of their situation, possess epistemic privilege and a more rigorous critical awareness of research problems. In this sense, as noted by, e.g., Helen Longino, situated knowledge is *social knowledge*, since all the factors of the cognitive process of which it is the result are of a social nature.[37] Haraway states that traditional science and philosophy practised by men was based on the doctrine of disembodied scientific objectivity. The disembodied discourse created in this way is nothing more than "rhetoric, a series of efforts to persuade relevant social actors that one's manufactured knowledge is a route to a desired form of very objective power."[38] In noting as well that the object of the cognitive process thus understood becomes disembodied, Haraway emphasizes that knowledge formulated from the point of view of a subject who is completely detached from his or her properties, isolated from individual experiences, underdefined, and deprived of any situation or position is "truly fantastic, distorted, and irrational."[39] Therefore, Haraway claims, the embodiment of traditional science and philosophy led to theoretical world domination by an anonymous, ahistorical, distanced subject, torn away from his or her circumstances, making use of universalistic tools whose application guaranteed the acquisition of knowledge characterized by a high degree of objectivity.

According to Haraway, an alternative proposal for the traditional ideal of research entails knowledge that takes into account a number of world conditions in which both the object and subject find themselves. This knowledge is like an embroidered quilt: a multi-layered textile, composed of multiple pieces. The philosopher emphasizes that a human being is capable of studying the world or a segment thereof only from a particular point of view and by means of specific methods and research tools.[40] Hence, this is neither a bird's-eye view (a metaphor applied to androcentric methods of practising science and philosophy) nor a guarantor of certain and objective knowledge, but a conglomerate of partial views and embodied and positioned perspectives. For to look/acquire/know is always to look/acquire/know from a particular point of view, oriented in terms of deconstruction, contestation, creation, changes in the form of knowledge, and methods of seeing.

To conclude, in the realm of feminist philosophy, knitting, weaving, embroidery, and quilting have been adopted in a positive manner, as specifically feminine — and potentially more "human" — ways of creating and developing knowledge, and simultaneously have been given an autonomous and cognitively valuable dimension. In feminist epistemology, the cognitive activity of women has been characterized, using the example of handicrafts and needlework, as attentive, contemplative, focused on the object, and at the same time creative, dynamic, and inclusive. The results of this activity have been defined as heterogeneous and evolving networks of relationships, connections, and meanings.

36. See: Małgorzata Sokalska, "Pieśniowe portrety kobiety-prządki," *Wielogłos*, n. 1-2 (9–10, 2010): 147-65; Elizabeth A. Flynn, "Composing as a Woman," *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 39, n. 4 (1988): 423-35; Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 77–101.

37. Helen E. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge. Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 215–25.

38. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, n. 3 (1988): 577.

39. Haraway, 587.

40. Haraway, 587.

Handicrafts as a Subversive Social Strategy for the Future

Prior to the beginning of the women's movement in the 60s and 70s, most women's art was denied the title of "fine art" because the techniques they used and the work they created had been devalued by the male-dominated art world. A hierarchy of the arts developed and was maintained according to the common opinion that these decorative forms were characterized by lesser intellectual involvement and served only domestic and aesthetic needs.

The transformation of domestic and decorative handicrafts into fine art was defined by craft moving into the public sphere, where women were creating works of art that surpassed the anonymity of domestic craft and could be viewed by spectators. Gradually, knitting, weaving, embroidery, and quilting entered the public sphere and made significant social and political statements. What is important, they revealed their subversive potential not only in art and esthetics, but also in fashion and contemporary, gender-sensitive philosophy. Eventually, there is no doubt that decorative and domestic handicrafts empower women and bring them together, enabling them to bypass consumer culture and reclaim the traditional women's skills devalued by society.

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